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The Making (and Unmaking) of PULL MY DAISY

by Blaine Allan

Abstract This article provides an account of the production of *PULL MY DAISY* (1959). A key film of the United States avant-garde of the 1950s, of the New American Cinema, and of the Beat Generation, it has generally been understood in terms of improvisation, corresponding to the tenets of “Spontaneous Prose” characteristic of Beat literature. However, the production practices of filmmakers Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank, working with a text by Jack Kerouac, demonstrated the lure of legitimacy and represented the attempted intervention of independent and marginal filmmakers in a form of commercial and professional cinema.

A hallmark of the New American Cinema, the independent filmmaking movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, *PULL MY DAISY*, has had a history and reputation based on a complex of incorrect assumptions, misconceptions, and mistaken information.* Released in 1959, it arrived at the tail end of the Beat Generation, and attracted interest before its release because of its connections to that literary and broad cultural movement. The film was unconditionally a part of the Beat Generation movement because it featured the most famous of the Beat writers: silent acting performances by Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky, and narration by Jack Kerouac.

Reviewers used Kerouac’s voice-over commentary as a lynchpin to connect the film and the literary practice of the Beat Generation. Although writers knew that the source of the film was an unproduced

play by Kerouac, they stressed the spontaneity of his narration. It was “spontaneous, unrehearsed,” “off-the-cuff,” “ad-libbed,” or “improvised.”¹ By emphasizing this aspect of the film’s production, writers have sought correspondences with the principles of spontaneous prose that Kerouac professed in order to describe his writing. Jonas Mekas uses the techniques of production to reinforce an ethic of improvisation and a principle of freedom in filmmaking:

During the recording of the commentary, Kerouac spoke the lines of each actor without any preparation or a previous viewing of the film—he just went on, as the images went by, in a sort of drunken trance; and his commentary has the immediacy and magic of such an improvisation.²

Reference to Kerouac’s commentary and its production tended not to open up discussion about the film, but to explain it away. After London’s National Film Theatre showing, the *Spectator*’s reviewer attributed no positive value to improvisation when she remarked parenthetically that Kerouac delivered his scenario “off the cuff in a kind of trance, it seems.”³ Another English reviewer speculated on the production and, presumably, the motives of the film and its makers:

Watching *PULL MY DAISY*, directed by Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, I thought

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they'd made it up nonsensically as they went along, then added a commentary to give it some sort of meaning.

Afterwards I discovered that, in fact, that's roughly what happened. Ah well, . . . it's free cinema, after all.⁴

The concept of improvisation can be easily misunderstood. Used loosely, the term confuses two approaches to filmmaking. One calls for the filmmaker to establish limitations that are broad enough to permit and encourage free play in production. The other implies disorganization or abandon. *PULL MY DAISY* has been subject to this precise misunderstanding.

Jerry Tallmer's discussion of the film's production gained a degree of authority because it appeared as an introduction to the transcript that Grove Press published in 1961. According to Tallmer, the third act of a Kerouac play served as "a skeleton shooting script," but soon the filmmakers began to deviate from the script, because "[t]oo much good stuff wasn't getting in." He portrays the production for its immediacy, dynamism, and recklessness, and asserts that even minimal pre-production planning was ill-conceived. "You're in a room where people are sitting around," Tallmer quotes Robert Frank. "You see something and swing the camera. . . . Then Alfred did the directing in his editing. Because after two days of rushes we sort of gave up on the story."⁵

David Amram elaborates on that image when he recalls of the set, "It was a madhouse," and affectionately remembers the production for the anarchic spirit and tomfoolery that caused Frank to "laugh so hard that he wouldn't be able to film us in action," and confounded Alfred Leslie, foiling all his detailed directions.⁶

What is remarkable is how little of the reported bedlam shows up in the completed film. The film telescopes a story time that spans "Early morning in the universe," as Kerouac elegantly describes in his commentary, to late at night into a screen time of 28 minutes. With an energizing disrespect for strict unities of time and space, it lucidly tells a story of the visit of a bishop and his family to a bohemian household of poets, artists, and musicians. The camera does not move rapidly in order to discover, as Tallmer and Frank imply; it moves carefully to follow action and to reframe its subject. More often, the camera remains static. The anarchic spirit that emerged during the production, according to both Tallmer and Amram, appears well contained by the boundaries of the narrative. In terms of pictorial quality, editing, structure, and performance, *PULL MY DAISY* demonstrates control, not loss of control.

The impression that the film was improvised in a context of confusion persists: notes for a 1988 revival of the film describe it blithely as "The quintessential Beat movie—a freewheeling improv from Kerouac's



Figure 1. Filming PULL MY DAISY (G-String Enterprises 1959). Alfred Leslie with arm raised. Around table from left: Alice Neel, Larry Rivers, Delphine Seyrig, Allen Ginsberg, Richard Bellamy (standing), David Amram, Gregory Corso. Standing at right: Denise Parker, Robert Frank, Sally Gross, Gert Berliner. All photographs by John Cohen.

[play,] *Beat Generation*.⁷ One of the few accounts to deviate from the gospel is Sheldon Renan's brief note that the film "appeared improvised but was actually carefully rehearsed."⁸ In his survey of the international experimental cinema, Stephen Dwoskin writes of the film, "it retains the feeling a freely improvised film in the style of 'Beat' poetic ramblings." However, Dwoskin also supplies a clue to the framework that has helped sustain that myth when he remarks that the film as "made within a fictional concept and filmed as documented reality."⁹ The statement implies that despite the fictional structure into which the film is cast, the uncontrolled manner in which it was made vouches for its authenticity as a representation of the Beat Generation. However, these assumptions and the interpretations that followed have been built on faulty foundations. For the filmmakers, improvisation involved a network of controls and liberties, preparation and spontaneity, and the establishment of a design for the film and its production.

There exists a parallel myth in the career of Jack Kerouac. The story goes that Kerouac was such a facile writer and skilled typist that changing sheets of paper in the typewriter irritated him and interrupted the flow of his thought. As a corrective, he wrote his final draft of *On the Road* on a sheet of teletype paper. Returning to the original manuscript, biographers Dennis McNally and Gerald Nicosia both discovered that he had actually composed the scroll manuscript on long sheets of art paper that he had taped together to form a roll.¹⁰ The difference between the two stories is minimal in fact, but substantial in meaning. The first implies that Kerouac found a medium that suited his method. According to the second, he physically constructed the medium in which he worked. The former also is built on the myth of the naive or intuitive artist. The element of preparation in the revision demonstrates a higher level of self-consciousness in Kerouac's working method. However, it also makes clear the true nature of improvisation in that method. The image of Kerouac preparing the roll of paper on which he composed his most influential and successful work evokes spontaneity as freedom within predetermined boundaries.

Like all Jack Kerouac's narratives, PULL MY DAISY has a source in the events of his own life. In autumn 1955, he had returned from Mexico City to stay in San Francisco with his friend Allen Ginsberg and Ginsberg's new-found companion Peter Orlovsky. A few weeks after his arrival, Kerouac sat in the audience at the Six Gallery for an event central to the history of the so-called San Francisco Renaissance, a reading that included performances by Mi-

chael McClure, Philip Lamantia, Philip Whalen, and Gary Snyder, as well as Ginsberg's electrifying first public reading of his monumental poem, *Howl*. Not long after, Malcolm Cowley promised that Viking Press would publish *On the Road*, which Kerouac had tried to sell for seven years. The model for the novel's hero and Kerouac's closest friend was also in the Bay area; Neal Cassady lived with his wife Carolyn and their children in a ranch house in Los Gatos.

The stories of the bishop's visit to the Cassady house during that time vary from account to account, although the principal source in all cases is Carolyn Cassady. Described variously as "a young Swiss Bishop at the Liberal Catholic Church," "a local bishop of the Unification Church," and "a progressive bishop" (and by Allen Ginsberg as "a priest from some kind of psychosis sect, somebody from the coastal nut belt . . ."), a clergyman delivered a public address; invited back to the Cassady home, he brought his mother and his aunt.¹¹ There they met Kerouac, Neal and Carolyn Cassady, Ginsberg, Orlovsky, Kerouac's friend from Denver, Bev Burford, and Pat Donovan, a friend of Neal's.¹² The encounter may have been more complicated for Carolyn than it first appears. Bev Burford remembered that Carolyn was involved with a "progressive priest," and Carolyn responded cryptically to the allegation in a 1982 article, though she refers to the cleric as a "bishop," a detail that suggests she is recalling the bishop who came to call at Los Gatos.¹³ For his part, Neal spent most of his time with another woman with whom he shared an apartment in San Francisco. Kerouac himself had long felt guilty because of his love for Carolyn, his best friend's wife, and he discreetly made his bed in a sleeping bag in the back yard.

During the evening, Allen teased the bishop's relatives by sitting between them on the sofa and talking about sex. Kerouac, seated on the floor, leaned on the bishop's leg and told him over and over, "I love you." One account reports that the bishop remained "steadfastly 'mystical.'" Another asserts, "Electrified by a good argument, the bishop changed from an effete milquetoast into a man possessed, and held his own and then some during the evening's dialogue." Carolyn also reported that as Kerouac became more rambunctious, he kept his eyes closed, signifying to her that he wanted to hide his shame at the incident.¹⁴

Two years later, Kerouac wrote the story as the third act of a stage play titled *The Beat Generation*, and outlined the script in a 1957 letter to Neal Cassady:



Figure 2. Jack Kerouac, Lucien Carr and Allen Ginsberg. “Like all Jack Kerouac’s narratives, *PULL MY DAISY* has a source in the events of his own life.”

... it’s the story of *Act One* You and Al Hinkle walk in Al sublette’s kitchen play chess while Al and I toast Khayyam tokay and Charley Mew figures horses, Connie standing around, finally you and Charley and me play flute solos straight off that Visions of Neal tape of 1952 ... crazy scene. Second *Act*: You and me alone at races, playing third choice, Pulido, dreams, talk, Cayce, girls, beer in cartons, etc. including the horse that spilled in the backstretch and nobody cared—*Act Three* the night of the Bishop with Donovan, Bev, Carolyn, Allen, Peter, you, me Bishop, Bishop’s mother and aunt but all of it changed to Lynbrook L.I. to New York Scene and the Bishop is “of the New Aramean church”—Nothing incriminating—I mean only grey-faces won’t like it—¹⁵

Kerouac’s synopsis demonstrates the delight in verbal excess that has characterized the Beats, from his own flow of words to the lung-testing long lines of Ginsberg’s *Howl* to Cassady’s own reputation for marathon conversation to the “goofing” that turns up in *PULL MY DAISY*.

Yet Kerouac’s script, although it embodies that zany iconoclasm of the finished film, also stages the confrontation of the bishop’s and the Beats’ ideas.¹⁶ The stage directions place Ginsberg between the

bishop’s mother and aunt and he periodically addresses them, anticipating the Harpo Marx-like innocent naughtiness that he displays in the finished film. However, in the first part of the play the dialogue principally involves Jack and the bishop in exchanges over the emptiness of the universe, stages of being, and opportunities for forgiveness. (Jack remembers an incident a couple of days before, when children threw eggs at Carolyn’s window, and she could delight in her opportunity to forgive. The anecdote stumps the bishop, and, as the film puts it, “The Angel of Silence [flies] over them all.”) While the bishop can match Jack’s rhetoric, he becomes more discombobulated by Peter’s impertinent questions about dreams, masturbation, and women, which lead into the litany of queries about whether everything is holy and the confusion that finally drives the bishop’s family from the house.

Kerouac’s title suggests that the play investigates or assesses the Beat Generation. In Carolyn Cassady’s mind, Kerouac might have been ashamed of the way they treated the bishop, but he places himself in the story as a more circumspect figure. After telling Allen and Peter that he is returning east, he retires to his place in the backyard where he is heard playing a flute. Despite what he wrote Cassady, the action appears to remain in the west, and the end of the play points forward to Kerouac’s return to New York. Implicitly it also anticipates the publication of *On the*

Road, which would change Kerouac's life, emblazon the image of the Beat Generation on the public, and mark the end of the subculture's innocence.

In the years following World War II, artists of all types bonded in informal social and cultural communities, the best known in San Francisco and New York. Kerouac and Leslie had met in New York in the late 1940s. By the time they decided to make a motion picture together, Leslie and Frank were neighbors and had known each other for several years. Frank had met Allen Ginsberg and, in 1957, introduced himself to Kerouac, with whom he travelled to Florida to work on an illustrated essay for *Life*, though the magazine never ran the bleak pictures that Frank brought back.¹⁷ At Robert and Mary Frank's apartment, Kerouac also met artist Dody Muller, and shortly afterward they became lovers. Through her, he strengthened his connections with the New York painters, such as Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers, Franz Kline, and Alfred Leslie.

Robert Frank assembled his photographic impressions of the scene in a 1985 collage, *10th Street Painters*, in which he admonished, MORE SPIRIT LESS TASTE—REMEMBER KEEP GOING.¹⁸ The activity of the arts community solidified with the artists' need to sell and circulate their work. Dody Muller recalls, "We were having fairly modest success in a very uphill fight, because there were only two or three uptown galleries, and they only showed established European artists." In response, the artists formed cooperative galleries to serve their own interests. One was the Hansa Gallery, which Richard Bellamy ran.

The film arose from both the desire to document the artists' activities, the significance of which the artists themselves perceived at the time, and from the possibilities that opened up for independent filmmakers in the 1950s. Learning from a radio broadcast about the consent decrees that led the studios to divest themselves of their theaters, Leslie thought that current developments would make cinema screens available for non-Hollywood films. David Amram remembers that "... no one was thinking about, 'We're gonna make the classic, underground, out-of-focus, beatnik epic, twenty minutes long.' Everybody was thinking it might be fun to get together and have kind of a home movie." However, Leslie saw his motives on a higher scale and explicitly aimed to develop his filmmaking skills for "a realigned framework of what had been the so-called commercial cinema."

In other words, PULL MY DAISY grew in a context that was different from that of a "home movie" with a script. The filmmakers undertook the project

not simply as a motion picture record for themselves, and not as a personal expression, but as a film with a potential public and a market. The case of *PULL MY DAISY* can stand as a paradigm of independent film production, where ideas, aspirations, and possibilities all filter down into the concentrated development of a single work.

Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank decided to make a motion picture together in 1958. Both had had some previous filmmaking experience, though not much. Leslie had bought a camera when he was still a teenager, and in the mid-1940s made a film and voice work called *THE EAGLE AND THE FOETUS* and another film, in collaboration with friend Tom Guarino, called *DIRECTIONS: A WALK AFTER THE WAR GAMES*.¹⁹ Frank, a photographer since the 1940s, started to experiment with moving pictures in the 1950s, when he was completing *The Americans*, the collection of still images that fixed his stature. Immediately after completing that project, he shot about a half-hour of 16-millimeter film in Florida, but left it unprocessed because he simply re-shot the same scenes and subjects he had already used in his photographs. In summer 1958 he also shot an absurd scenario at the seaside that featured his wife, sculptor Mary Frank, and Allan Kaprow.²⁰

They agreed to collaborate on finding three stories or other types of material that they would adapt into three, 30-minute films. Assembled in series, Leslie explains, the stories would constitute a feature-length presentation that could fit into the commercial system of distribution and exhibition. By choosing to make several shorter films instead of a single feature, the filmmakers acknowledged their own tentative approach to producing a movie. Frank was excited by the examples of Italian neorealism and the *nouvelle vague*, and the project that he and Leslie had in mind resembled Rossellini's compilation of vignettes on the liberation of Italy, *PAISA* (1946), and some of the short films that had made their way from Paris to New York, including the early dramas of François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. By planning to produce a trilogy that fit the conventional North American exhibition format, Frank and Leslie demonstrated a serious desire that whatever they produced would have the chance to be seen.

They considered a number of story ideas, including original stories and adaptations. Several possibilities arose: Isaac Babel's story, *The Sin of Jesus*, Horace McCoy's short novel, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, and Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel, *Le Voyeur*. They secured the rights to the Babel story without difficulty but they were unable to acquire either of

the other two. (Ironically, Robbe-Grillet's U.S. publisher, Barney Rosset's Grove Press, was part of their Greenwich Village milieu and played a vital role in distributing the writings of the Beat Generation, including the script of PULL MY DAISY.

Mary Frank reminded her husband of some photographs he had taken of a Parisian who surrounded himself in his flat with mannequins. The idea of a story about a man who enacts his fantasies with inert models appears to Leslie for both creative and practical reasons: first, it would be a valuable and interesting vehicle for a single actor, and second, it imposed strict limitations on space for the production. When he developed the narrative as a film script, he set the action in a specific basement apartment that he knew on Cherry Street.

The actor who came to mind was Zero Mostel, who had only recently emerged from the shadow of McCarthyism and the entertainment industry blacklist. He was appearing at the Rooftop Theatre south of Houston Street in *Ulysses in Nighttown*. When Frank and Leslie contacted him, they presented him with the idea and a treatment for the film, which they had titled MR. Z. Mostel turned the project down at first, then agreed to do the picture conditional upon securing adequate financing. With THE SIN OF JESUS and MR. Z, they now had plans for two-thirds of their proposed trilogy. For the third part, they had numerous options, but no decisions.

Frank and Kerouac had been talking about

making a film together since earlier in the year. Dody Muller suggested a film of *On the Road*, but they realized that the narrative would prove far too expansive for a narrative to run only 30 minutes. Published in late 1957, the novel brought Kerouac immediate celebrity status and commercial potential. Warner Brothers had offered a reported \$110,000 for the screen rights, and both Marlon Brando at Paramount and Jerry Wald at Twentieth Century-Fox had expressed interest in the property, but Kerouac's agent, Sterling Lord, held out for a higher price. Building on the success of *On the Road*, Grove Press released *The Subterraneans* in the spring of 1958 and Viking Press had accepted its second Kerouac novel, *The Dharma Bums*. The bidding for Kerouac's work makes it unlikely that Leslie and Frank could have acquired the rights to *On the Road*, even if they judged it suitable, and Kerouac himself held out in full knowledge of their inexperience as filmmakers. Still, the attractions of filming a story by Kerouac or having his name on a movie were obvious.

Dody Muller and Jack Kerouac travelled back and forth between Manhattan, where she and most of their friends lived, and Northport on Long Island, where Kerouac and his mother shared the house he had purchased with his recent earnings. On one of her periodic trips to the suburbs, Muller drove Frank and Leslie out in her big, white convertible. They stayed in Kerouac's bedroom, and looked through the volumes of material he stored there. One of Ker-



Figure. 3. During the production of PULL MY DAISY, Jack Kerouac listens to a recording of himself reading poetry over the radio.

ouac's favorite implements was the tape recorder, which he used both for amusement and to create. He recorded his own writings, often with the radio playing the the background, and among his recordings was the play he had written the year before. Leslie had already read and rejected *The Beat Generation* as a film possibility. However, Kerouac had read the play into a tape recorder while listening to Symphony Sid Torin's jazz broadcast on the radio, and when he played the tape for Leslie, the painter had what he describes as "a flash of understanding." The most important element of the performance was the fact that Kerouac enacted all the characters' voices. Leslie remarks:

I couldn't imagine it being performed because nobody could perform these parts. You can't act out Kerouac's characters, because they're all poetry . . . They're not independent people, independent characters. Each person he writes about is another aspect of himself. . . .

Leslie imagined adapting the third act of *The Beat Generation* and using Kerouac's taped version on the sound track. He was first inclined to film to a sound playback of that tape, with the actors lipsynching the dialogue that Kerouac spoke, as the Italian neorealist films he and Frank admired matched professional voices with the images of persons from the street. He was so overwhelmed with the idea that he spent the entire return trip to New York convincing Frank of the value of the approach, even though Frank had been the first to express interest in putting Kerouac's material onscreen.

PULL MY DAISY always remained outside the conventional systems of motion picture production, but it also demonstrated the lure of legitimacy. By seeking outside financing and forming a limited partnership, the producers made the film into a business as much as a form of personal expression.

About six months passed between the moment Leslie and Frank decided to go ahead with the Kerouac film and the time they found the money to start shooting. Leslie asked the art collectors and dealers he knew and Frank asked his acquaintances in photography circles. Neither Leslie nor Frank had a track record as film producers, and the enterprise of investing in a film was more ephemeral than the investment involved in purchasing a work of art. Convinced Kerouac's name would ensure backing, instead the novice filmmakers found that no one would risk money on the production. In late 1958, however, the Geigy Foundation purchased one of Leslie's paintings, and the artist decided to use the \$1000 windfall as the first block of money in the film's ac-

count, hoping that his own commitment would attract money from other sources.

Using Kerouac's playscript as the film's scenario, Leslie hired a typist to produce copies of the third act, with title pages that gave Leslie directing credit, named Frank the photographer and promised a stellar cast. By starting to shoot the film, the filmmakers wanted to attract investors by showing them footage, tangible evidence of their capabilities. At the end of a week's shooting, Leslie remembers, a financial bonus arrived unexpectedly from another source. In payment for a photographic session, Frank received a check, coincidentally for \$1000, and matched his partner's contribution by investing in the film.

Frank and Leslie had spoken to Walter Gutman, the stock market analyst, art collector, and painter, about putting money into the project, but Gutman held off until after both the filmmakers invested their own resources. Still Gutman, whom Leslie has called "the trembling libertine behind the scenes of Wall Street," insisted that he invested solely because of his infatuation with Mary Frank.²¹ He offered \$1500; as he asserted, "I put money into it just because Mary asked me. It didn't make any difference to me what they did." Gutman subsequently made a number of films himself, but at the time he had no interest or understanding of independent filmmaking. "I thought of movies as Hollywood, period," he admitted. Nevertheless, he not only risked his own money, but convinced his assistant to contribute a portion equal to his own and advised others in his office to invest, bringing the film's assets up to \$7000.

The final, and single largest financial investment also came from Wall Street, via Gutman. When Jack Dreyfus sounded Gutman out about joining his firm, Gutman declined, but in the course of discussion suggested to Dreyfus that the film might be a good way to lose money. Taking Gutman's advice, Dreyfus put in \$7500. Despite the importance of the contribution—half the film's budget—Dreyfus had no interest in the production and, according to Gutman, never saw the film.

Leslie, Frank, and Kerouac formed and served as the directors of a legitimate, limited partnership that they called "G-String Enterprises," but only Kerouac made no financial commitment. In a postcard to Leslie, he expressed his reluctance to enter into such an agreement by matching their \$1000 shares in the company.²² In return for his investment and support, however, Walter Gutman adopted the role of a special partner. To an extent he provided some of the legitimacy that the filmmakers sought. He accompanied Leslie and Frank when they opened an ac-

count at Manufacturers Trust for G-String Enterprises. The painter and the photographer, in Gutman's words, "both specialized in being not at all *soigné*." Both wore their hair much longer than the 1958 fashion, and Leslie showed up without hat or tie. The bank vice-president that they met had never had to deal with anyone quite like them. Fortunately, Gutman was by their side and art dealer Tibor de Nagy, also foreign representative to the bank's head office, had authenticated the artists to a cautious bank officer. Gutman also supplied the services of his accountant, Abraham Spilky, whose firm handled the production's bookkeeping.

The idea of a general partnership had been suggested by Lee Eastman, a lawyer who advised artists and whom Leslie had met in East Hampton. Leslie and Eastman devised a system by which persons who worked on the film earned different types of shares from individuals who invested money. Another lawyer and a friend of Frank, Sam Shaw, became the first attorney for G-String and, according to Leslie, drew up the papers for the partnership.

The filmmakers tried to employ professional production practices to administer the film. They took steps to reserve rights to performances and materials that they used, and allocated money to pay their talent and crew, rather than just using friends and acquaintances who would work for free. Yet, like John Cassavetes's *SHADOWS* (1958), *PULL MY DAISY* was primarily a labour of interest, affection, and enthusiasm. By deferring payment, Cassavetes had alienated some members of the company and, when the film started to earn profits, the shareholding workers claimed that the producers were withholding dividends.²³ G-String, in contrast, employed its cast and crew, and paid them modest fees for their services. A dispute over rights to the theme song, "The Crazy Daisy," did arise after the film was completed, but the company legitimately held the rights to the song it had commissioned. However, the conflict was exacerbated when, following the film's completion, the agreements between all the people who had worked on the film and the production company disappeared somewhere in the lawyer's files.

Merchandising and the licensing of products associated with a specific film have long been methods of augmenting income from motion pictures. Leslie wished to document the shooting and he hoped that the photographs of the poets and artists might earn some revenue for the company, so G-String Enterprises engaged photographer John Cohen to take production stills. Cohen took numerous pictures on and off the set, and Leslie's suspicions about the worth of the pictures proved correct, though to a

lesser extent than he might have hoped. *Life* magazine had wanted photographs of the Beat writers, but had been unable to secure their cooperation. Cohen sold a selection of his pictures for several hundred dollars, unfortunately to illustrate Paul O'Neil's assault on the Beats, "The Only Rebellion Around."²⁴ The publication, which appeared on newsstands the same week as the film showed at the San Francisco Film Festival, angered Dody Muller, whom the article depicted as Kerouac's current lover, although the relationship had ended several months before.

When Grove Press published its book version of the film, it established the rights that various parties held to the separate components of the production. Kerouac owned the text of the narration, which was transcribed verbatim from the sound track. G-String Enterprises owned the rights to frame enlargements from the film itself, but also shared with Grove Press the cost of Cohen's fee to reproduce eight production stills. In other words, the plan may have been to make money by agreeing to the publication, but the company finally had to spend money on the photographs it had originally commissioned.²⁵

Jack Kerouac used the actual names of his friends when he wrote his fictional chronicles; the names changed when he and his editors revised the manuscripts for publication. Since the incident with the bishop, Neal Cassady had been convicted of trafficking marijuana in 1958, and was serving time in the penitentiary at San Quentin, while Carolyn continued to live in Los Gatos. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Orlovsky had spent much of the intervening time travelling, including a period in Tangier with William Burroughs and Gregory Corso. Kerouac returned to the U.S. in May 1957, Orlovsky came back to New York in spring 1958, Ginsberg in the summer, and Corso in the autumn.

Frank and Leslie agreed that Ginsberg and Orlovsky should play themselves and Corso, who had come to prominence as a poet over the past year, was to play Kerouac, while Kerouac, unseen, would speak the dialogue and narration for all the characters. They cast most of the parts with non-actors, most with connections to the art world. Even Denise Parker, who was to play Carolyn and was the only professional actor in the troupe, was married to an artist. They asked painter Larry Rivers to play Neal, to be called Milo, and Richard Bellamy, then unemployed, to be the bishop. As a joke, Bellamy asked to be credited as "Mooney Peebles," a name he had used when he hosted a "hillbilly music" show on a Connecticut radio station. Leslie called David Amram and asked him to play the musician, Mezz McGill-

cuddy—Pat McGillicuddy in Kerouac's script, based on Pat Donovan—and to compose and perform the film's score, and Amram accepted, even though he had only recently completed work on Joseph Papp's production of *Antony and Cleopatra* and had committed himself to several projects for early in the year, including a Broadway play due to open the first week of February. Leslie cast another painter, Alice Neel, as the bishop's mother, and Sally Gross as the character who is variously referred to as the bishop's sister and the bishop's mother's sister. According to Leslie, G-String Enterprises paid the actors \$2.50 per hour; Alice Neel calculated her wages at \$25 a day, and Allen Ginsberg reported to Carolyn Cassady that he was earning \$18 a day for five days' work on the film, the first money he had worked for since leaving San Francisco.

Kerouac's script kept the action in a house, but the film was to be shot in late 1958 at Alfred Leslie's loft at 108 Fourth Avenue in lower Manhattan, which meant, among other things, that there was no back yard for the Kerouac character to retire to at the end of the story. Formerly an employment office, Leslie's loft was a tall, narrow chamber, twenty-four feet wide, eighty feet long, and sixteen feet high. When he took possession, he removed the fixtures that the previous tenants had left behind and, without completely cleaning it, had the room sprayed white, so all

the little bits of trash were now encased in whitewash. He had divided the room in the middle with an elevated bed and a storage area for his large canvases. The east end of the room faced the street with tall windows outside of which was the fire escape. The windows at the west end, where the kitchen and bathroom were located, faced the back of the next building. Because it was the living area, but also because it received less natural light, most of the film was shot in this part of the loft.

Inevitably, Leslie used some of the accoutrements of his own living and working space to decorate the film set, for example the self-portrait visible in the film's opening pan. Some time before, he also bought the entire contents of a second-hand store that had gone out of business, and recreated the store in his studio for a photograph. Bit by bit, all the furnishings of the store disappeared, except for the U.S. flag that appears in one segment of the film (ironically, the icon that links the film most concretely with Frank's book of still photographs, *The Americans*²⁷). Leslie also collected kimonos, and dressed two of the women in the film in examples from his collection.

The incident that Kerouac remembered and dramatized took place in a ranch house typical of the 1950s U.S. family, not in a Lower East Side artist's loft, and the Cassadys, though not a typical example, nonetheless comprised a family. Neal's and Carolyn's

Figure 4. Alice Neel and Richard Bellamy with Alfred Leslie's flag.



son, Jamie, had wandered out into the party with the bishop, and Kerouac's script had called for a child to play a pivotal role. The filmmakers wanted to cast either Robert and Mary Frank's eight-year-old, Pablo, or his sister, four-year-old Andrea, and finally selected the boy. The pump organ and the *art nouveau* lampshade that decorate the living area both came from the Frank apartment, and to Leslie's mind these small elements provided the feeling of a home life that befitted a family.

Frank and Leslie tried to alter the image of the Beat Generation by adding such touches of domesticity. The *Life* article would be illustrated with a studio photograph, titled "The Well-Equipped Pad," which purported to catalogue the items the typical Beat would not be without and purveyed an image of self-absorption, negligence, and wilful poverty. PULL MY DAISY conveys a different idea, and counteracts the connotations of danger in the beat image by stressing the family setting.

The filmmakers enlisted the aid of experienced friends to set up the loft for filming. Lighting designer John Robertson, with whom Leslie had worked as a set designer in the early 1950s, recommended the lights Frank and Leslie should rent to shoot the film, and he and electrician Chuck Haden made the necessary adjustments for the increased power that the lights would draw. Leslie also used his stage experience to diagram a lighting plan. As a camera assistant, Frank hired his friend, German-born painter and photographer Gert Berliner, and they shot with a rented Arriflex on a fine grain, black-and-white negative camera stock. Although they shot 16 millimeter original, they needed the fine image quality for the 35 millimeter blow-up that they planned to use for theatrical release.

The original plan was to shoot the film in chronological order, and the first sequence was a prologue that would run under the credit sequence. The film was to open in silence on a shot of a toy bus, from the point of view of an unseen person lying in bed. The sharp sound of a whistle breaks the silence and the bus starts to move. So does the film, as the theme music, played by a harpsichord and sung by a countertenor, begins. Every time the whistle blows, the toy bus changes direction, and different camera angles disclose that a woman dressed in a Chinese kimono and propped up on her elbows in bed, controls the toy. At the end of the credits Carolyn, played by Denise Parker, rises from bed, crosses over to the kitchen sink and draws a glass of water from the faucet. At that point, a long shot establishes the space of the loft.

Although they intended to use this sequence as

the film's opening, when Frank and Leslie saw the footage, they agreed that it looked too professional. Although they also agreed that they should replace Denise Parker as Carolyn, the actress remained as an unidentified character on the periphery of the drama. The other characters essentially ignore her, and she never moves from the bed or plays an active role in the principal drama.

Frank and Leslie considered a number of candidates, professional actors from the Broadway and off-Broadway stage as replacements. Frank had been assigned to photograph Archibald MacLeish's *J. B.*, and thought that Nan Martin, who was acting in the production, might be suitable. She declined, though she called their attention to a French actress married to painter Jack Youngerman, Delphine Seyrig. Denise Parker was the only other professional actor working in the company, and Seyrig, Leslie recalls, remained apprehensive about working with amateurs. The director had his own reservations; he felt that her stage training made her move like an actor, in contrast to the untrained Ginsberg, Rivers, Corso, Orlovsky, and Amram, who all simply behaved like ordinary people in front of the camera. However Frank, another expatriate European, insisted that she be cast as Carolyn, and Leslie acceded to his partner's wishes.²⁸

Leslie has asserted that he wanted the film to be a "facsimile of a home movie," in the sense that it would serve as a structured insight into the ways of life of people that the public associated with the Beat Generation. Defending the film against a cult that misunderstood his ideas of spontaneity he wrote, a decade after the film's production, that the "film was no more random or improvised than Antonioni or Rossellini," and that "amateurism in DAISY was used to reinforce reality."²⁹ As Dody Muller pragmatically points out, the filmmakers did not have the money to be disorganized.

He thought of shooting the play as a continuous sequence, in other words, of maintaining the integrity of the piece as a drama by enacting long sequences with a number of cameras positioned throughout the loft. After he and Frank shot the entire work three times, they would construct the film from the material that resulted. In conjunction with this plan, he considered the possibilities of joining separate takes together if a character were caught in mid-action, even if the takes were from the same angle. Although the editing figure itself would be unconventionally disjointed, the action would continue. Finally, however, he decided to shoot the film in a more conventional manner, with a single camera, and breaking the scene into individual setups, re-

peating scenes for each of the angles he required to cover the action.

He devised a plan to ensure that he would have enough choices when he edited the film by making at least three takes of every setup (although others who worked on the film do not remember that he adhered rigorously to the scheme). Such a plan permitted spontaneity by providing a structure within which the actors could work with relative freedom. On the set, he let the actors go through each shot to observe what ideas they brought to the scene, and walked through it with them and talked it out before putting the shot on film. In addition, the production gained a degree of freedom because it was shot without sound. Planning for triple takes, Leslie suggested changes from one to the next and accepted the alterations that his actors brought to the shot. Understandably, the plan generally resulted in three takes that were similar, but with noticeable differences.

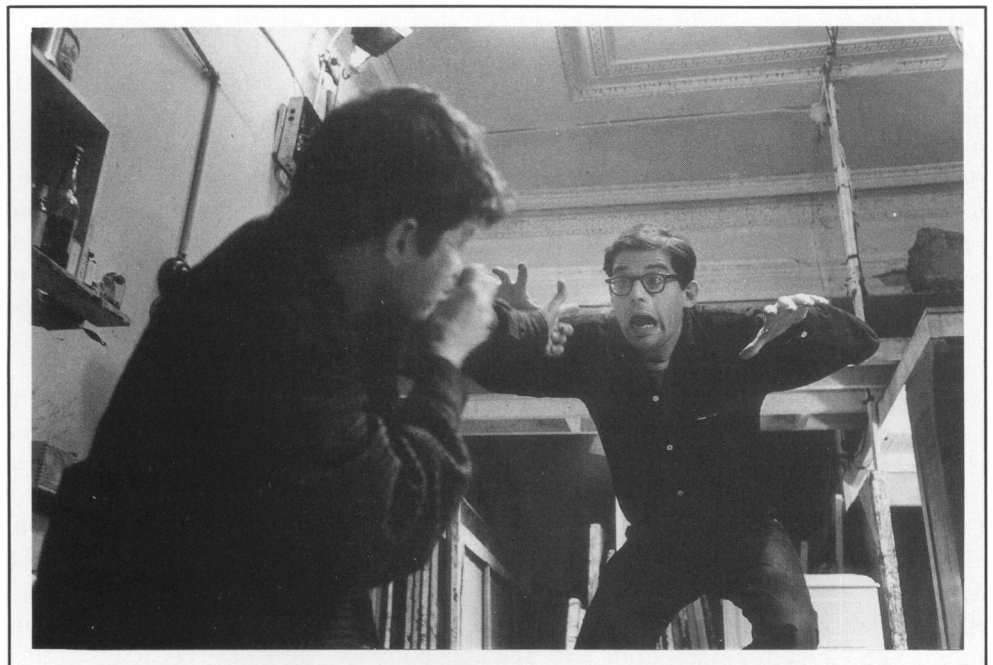
To prepare, Leslie, broke the script down into “movements.” He numbered Kerouac’s script in segments, like a musical score numbered by phrase. He recalls that each night he walked through the scenes he planned to shoot the next day, measuring the number of steps needed to cross a space. He timed the action in order to keep to a self-imposed schedule that called for the company to complete two minutes of usable footage each day. Although a col-

laborative effort, the filmmakers’ roles divided between Frank’s cinematography and Leslie’s staging, the traditional function of the director, the division that was noted on the title page of the shooting script.

Most of the non-professional actors had little patience for the preparations that a film production requires. All of them knew even less about filmmaking than either Leslie or Frank, and perceived both order and disorder in the production. David Amram stresses the anarchic contributions of the actors when he says, “Alfred would try to talk out the scene and we would act it out like a grammar school acting class. But then eventually everybody would get into it, start improvising, and doing something else, and fooling around.” Cast members also tried dutifully to ruin takes; Ginsberg dropped his trousers while the filmmakers were trying to take a closeup of an easily distracted Corso.³⁰ One day, Frank brought in a megaphone on which Mary Frank had lettered, “The Director” for Leslie, and he adds, “I should have had a whistle, too.”

Richard Bellamy, however, remembers that Frank and Leslie consulted closely on how each scene was to be shot. Each shot, he concurs, was carefully set up and repeated, demonstrating both a strong directorial hand and the capacity for improvisation. For Amram, Leslie “was flipping out constantly; but an amazing director—even if he didn’t know what he was doing, it would all come out.” Similarly, Bellamy

Figure 5. “Anarchic contributions” from Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg.



concluded that the individual scenes were obviously fixed in the filmmakers' minds, but the overall dramatic structure, the way that those elements fit into the film, remained unclear at the time of shooting. The only real disruption occurred when the company was in the middle of shooting the jam session sequence, and movers arrived to pick up the large canvas that had paid for the first part of the production. Frank assiduously kept shooting and recorded the moving on film. On the whole, though, the company had 14 days of shooting eight hours a day without interruption.

It took only a couple of days for the actors to become comfortable enough in front of the camera to achieve the kind of spontaneity the filmmakers sought. Sometimes, the director tried to trick them into action. When Mezz McGillicuddy arrives, he ignores everyone in the loft and immediately shuts himself in the toilet. To elicit surprise reactions from the others, Leslie dressed David Amram in a cowboy suit and concealed him in the bathroom. But when Amram burst through the door, instead of being shocked and surprised, the rest of the cast erupted into chaos and Corso started to throw fruit around the set. Evidently Leslie misjudged the type of spontaneity the actors could achieve.

At other points, he used what he already knew about the performers to evoke feelings that he drew from other images. Larry Rivers's dance—a jig characteristic of the ebullient painter—resurrects a similar moment in Dovzhenko's *EARTH* (1930), and the image of Pablo Frank puffing out his cheeks as he plays the baritone horn may suggest Dizzy Gillespie, but Leslie intended it to recall an image in Eisenstein's *IVAN THE TERRIBLE* (1944).

The care and planning that went into the production is evident in the finished film at least in its restricted camera movement. A tripod fixes the camera position, and movement is motivated by action within the frame. One scene was in fact shot wild, with the camera moving, as Leslie has written, "wherever it wanted according to what the camera saw," but that shot was discarded after the first assembly of the picture.³¹ The original ending of the picture also would have involved more extensive camera movement. The film now ends as Milo, Allen, Peter, Gregory, and Mezz go out the front door into the night. Concluding with a close shot of the newel post at the foot of the stairs, the camera remains inside the building. One plan had the camera move outside with the five characters, who would then start to speak in their own voices, and the film end with a long dolly shot that follows them down the street. The sequence signified the character's freedom and release, both in

terms of reclaiming their own voices and the abandon of the camera in contrast to its control while within the restricted space of the loft. However, Leslie and Frank assessed that such a conclusion might have worked, but only in a longer film that then followed the characters to a subsequent sequence, and they decided not to shoot it.

Kerouac did not participate in the production, and saw very little of the shooting. He and Dody Muller watched one day from the safe vantage point of Leslie's elevated bed. A myth persists that Leslie barred him from the set after a drunken Kerouac had disrupted production by bringing up a couple of Bowery bums; Leslie refutes the story, though he does acknowledge that Kerouac did anger him by inviting some derelicts up to the Fourth Avenue loft before the production commenced.

Altogether, Frank had shot about three hours of silent footage. The filmmakers had long since abandoned the idea of shooting the film to the Kerouac tape that already existed, and had shot the film silent. They now planned to edit the picture and add a music track and another commentary that Kerouac would contribute.

The postproduction of *PULL MY DAISY* took place over the rest of the winter and spring 1959. In a rented editing room at 1600 Broadway, Leslie worked day and night for two weeks, cutting the film down from the available footage, and deciding how to adjust their original plans.

Neither of the filmmakers had had any experience with film sound. Moreover, Leslie's impaired hearing necessitated an assistant to help with work on the sound track, and he and Frank hired Leon Prochnik, an N.Y.U. graduate who had worked on television commercials and with Willard Van Dyke. He had known Kerouac himself since 1957, and contacted the filmmakers while he was out of work, hoping for a job. Needless to say, Prochnik also knew more about conventional editing-room organization than the artists, and spent the initial days of his employment familiarizing himself with the footage and sorting out the mess they had already made.

Their decisions in the editing room led to several more days of shooting. The rough assembly compelled them to devise three new sequences. To capture the uncomfortable silence in the middle of the party, Frank had shot a slow, 360-degree pan around the kitchen table. They decided to interrupt the extended take with sequences that illustrated what the people were thinking. After the first assembly, Leslie also found the film "claustrophobic." Except for the high angle shots looking out into the street, the action was restricted to the space of the apartment and

the dark hallway. Wishing to bring something of the outside world into the space, he and Frank and Berliner took Richard Bellamy, Delphine Seyrig, Alice Neel, Sally Gross, Dody Muller, Mary Frank, and the U.S. flag out to a warehouse district under the Manhattan Bridge in the bitter cold to shoot the bishop's sermon. Understandably, considering the arctic temperatures, Bellamy laced his speech to the tiny congregation with expletives.

With the toy bus sequence deleted and the exit out the door and down the street left unshot, the film lacked both a beginning and an end. The filmmakers solved the latter problem by completing the departure without actually leaving the hallway, and the five men all come down the stairs and pile out the door. They had excised the first opening they shot partly because it looked too polished, but they replaced it with a new sequence of extraordinary beauty and eloquence, the "Early morning in the universe" scene, in which Seyrig, as the wife, opens the shutters to let in the light, gives Pablo his breakfast, and takes him to school.

Considering their judgment that the film was claustrophobic, it is not surprising that all three sequences serve to connect the world inside the loft with the world outside. The bishop's flashback makes the connections through thought and memory. The other two serve narrative functions, the opening leading into the story and the end drawing characters out of the setting and closing the narrative.

Leslie, Frank, and Dody Muller took the completed picture cut and a projector to Northport to show Kerouac and to prepare him to record the commentary. Although he had watched a bit of the shooting, Kerouac had seen none of the film. When he viewed the silent footage, he was disappointed with what he saw. Only when he recorded a voice track and saw the film again with the recording did he understand the approach the filmmakers had taken and appreciate the film. Although the original plan had been to shoot the film to playback to Kerouac's original tape, the revised strategy used exactly the opposite approach.

Leslie, and Frank went with Kerouac, Dody Muller, and David Amram to Jerry Newman's sound studio on the Lower East Side to record the narration. Newman and Kerouac had known each other since 1944, and Newman had recorded Kerouac singing and reading on numerous occasions. Leslie had also invited the theater and opera director Frank Corsaro to the session. Corsaro, one of whose recent successes was *A Hatful of Rain*, was also a brilliant countertenor, and Leslie hoped that he would sing for the film. True to form, Kerouac was drunk when

he arrived at the studio, and there was reefer and more alcohol waiting for him there. The mixture of drugs made him irascible and contentious, and he easily managed to repulse the only strangers in the room, Corsaro and the woman who accompanied him. After the incident, Corsaro refused to work on the project.

Newman put Kerouac into a studio and gave him a pair of headphones so he could hear Amram play piano. Kerouac and Amram had performed jazz-poetry readings with Howard Hart and Philip Lamantia in 1957. In this recording session, however, the music would not itself be used in the film's sound track. Kerouac used the original text of *The Beat Generation*, but wove around it as he improvised. He recorded the narration all the way through, three times. The first was tentative. He acquainted himself with the film's timing and stumbled through the story, identifying the characters as they appeared on-screen, but he also thought that after one take he was through for the day. David Amram remembers that Leslie had to prod Kerouac for additional takes, saying,

"Well, Jack, you're getting close. That was very amazing for the first time."

And Jack said, "That's it. I believe in spontaneous prose. . . . One time is plenty."

"But Jack, we have to get—"

"No, I'm touched by the hand of God."

And that was the first time that Alfred had been quiet in years.

Nevertheless, Kerouac finally relented and went through the film for two more takes, though Prochnik remembers that when the recording session was all over he, Frank, and Leslie all despaired they were dealing with "an unmitigated disaster."

Instead of using one of the three sound tracks, they assembled pieces of the three to correspond with the picture. At some points, the sound follows the picture, as it would if the viewer were reporting on the events that appear onscreen. At other points, the commentary anticipates the picture. To redouble the freneticism of the images, Leslie and Prochnik looped words from the various takes and cut them together closely, so Kerouac's tone of voice changes from word to word. In addition, they took extraneous phrases and used them in the narration. Kerouac wistfully mused on the trail of smoke rising from his own cigarette, repeating, "Up you go, little smoke." They extracted the phrase from that context and matched it with the end of the jam session, as all the characters calm down. In the film, "Up you go, little smoke" refers to one second to a waft of smoke floating from an ashtray toward the hanging lamp,



Figure 6. PULL MY DAISY collaborators off the set: Larry Rivers, Jack Kerouac, David Amram, Allen Ginsberg, and, back to camera wearing cap, Gregory Corso.

and a moment later it becomes Milo's playful, loving words to his son as he lifts Pablo up and takes him back to bed.

After the second picture cut, and only days after recording Kerouac's narration, Amram wrote the music track in a concentrated burst of activity over three days. He arranged the material for a Renaissance-style group and his own jazz combo. The ensemble included George Barrow on tenor saxophone, Arthur Phipps on bass, and Al Harewood on drums, as well as Midhat Serbagi on viola, Ronnie Roseman on oboe and English horn, and Jane Taylor on bassoon. Amram played keyboards and French horn. For the jazz sequences, he added an alto saxophone player, Sahib Shihab. As with the dialogue, part of the musicians' work involved a reversal of normal procedure for scoring a film, because the actors had played musical instruments and none of what they played had been recorded. Shihab had to watch Larry Rivers's hand movements—Rivers was an experienced sax player himself—and try to reproduce the way he played for the sound track. Similarly, Amram played the harmonium while watching Alice Neel's hands onscreen.

As part of his strategy for financing and publicizing the movie, Leslie had wanted theme music that could be released as a commercially available single.

"There Goes My Baby," then a radio hit, excited him, and at a party he met the writers and producers of the Drifters' recording, Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller. He asked them if they would be interested in writing for the film, but Frank was against using their music, and the filmmakers did not press their offer (though Leslie did use a song written by them in his 1964 film, *THE LAST CLEAN SHIRT*).

Instead, they decided to set to music doggerel that Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Cassady had composed over 10 years before. Jay Landesman had published "Fie My Fum" in *Neurotica* in 1950, and Amram wrote a melody to match the simple, suggestive verse. Both filmmakers knew the singer Anita Ellis, Leslie mainly because of her television work. She had dubbed singing voices for both Rita Hayworth, in *GILDA* (1946), and Vera-Ellen, in *THREE LITTLE WORDS* (1950), and in the late 1950s she lived in New York and had established a following for her club performances—despite her overwhelming stage-fright—at the Blue Angel. She had made friends with Robert and Mary Frank on a freighter that took them from Spain to New York in the early 1950s. Frank asked her to sing the song on two days' notice, and she had to learn the number at the studio, because the filmmakers had neglected to send her the lyrics. Hearing Ginsberg read the words, she was

concerned that it was a man's song; in fact, one line had to be altered because of that problem. The male sexual pun, "Hop my heart on" changed to the more innocuous "Hop my heart song," because "Anita Ellis broke up every time she had to sing it."³²

Prochnik remembers that he stayed up all night to prepare the tracks, and slept in the cutting room the night before he, Leslie, and Frank took the film to Reeves Studios for the final mix. The mixers, like many of the film's ultimate audience, thought they were going to see a pornographic film.

When the film was completed, but before a final print was struck, it still bore the title of Kerouac's play, *The Beat Generation*. Kerouac, Frank, and Leslie were all at different stages in their respective careers. Consequently, each had a different stake in the film. The value of the film to an individual involved in its production is measured in credit, and the credits as they appear on the film reflect the split in responsibility between Frank and Leslie on the one hand and Kerouac on the other. The opening title, "A G-String Enterprise," brands the film with its collective corporate name. The superimposed title "Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie Present," claims the production responsibilities, and the credit following the main title announces the limited responsibility, "Written and Narrated by Jack Kerouac." Although Kerouac was less directly involved with the continual process of the film's production than either Frank or Leslie, he remained a central part of the film's value on the marketplace. In addition, the original idea belonged to him. Moreover, as a successful author, he had the advantage of a representative to act on his behalf and, by Leslie's account, the wording of the credit had to satisfy Kerouac's agent, Sterling Lord.

Leslie says that he and Frank settled the order of their own names' appearance more casually, with a coin toss. Leon Prochnik's name appears before Frank's and Leslie's in the editing credit, suggesting his importance at that stage, though he asked to have his name removed from the print when he saw how many "Frank and Leslie" titles the film actually had. The final credit, "Adapted, Photographed, and Directed by Robert Frank [and] Alfred Leslie," suggests compromise as much as collaboration. Adaptation refers to the transformation of Kerouac's stage play into the film version and hedges Kerouac's writing credit. By separating the two credits, placing Kerouac's at the film's beginning and Frank's and Leslie's at the end, the film acknowledges Kerouac's public role in the film, but reserves actual responsibility for the filmmakers. The sharing of photography and director's credit also represents a compromise. *PULL MY DAISY* was important as Frank's first film, to es-

tablish his position as a filmmaker. Leslie, on the other hand, found himself with conflicting opportunities with his growing success as a painter, and more readily bargained away the credit he might have claimed for directing *PULL MY DAISY* and the recognition that might have accrued as a result.

The film was first shown to cast, friends, and family at the Museum of Modern Art at 11:30 in the morning, Tuesday, May 12, 1959.³³ Kerouac attended the screening with his friend John Clellon Holmes, but the special event did not disturb his usual habits; he spent the rest of that May day drinking and resisting Holmes's admonitions to eat. In a January letter to writer Al Aronowitz, Kerouac had objected to the moment in the film when Milo points his finger like a revolver at Gregory's forehead and says, "Pow!" It introduced a note of violence that he thought "played into the hands of literary snobs."³⁴ Clearly Kerouac was sensitive to the pernicious aspects of the Beat image that the press and literary establishment built around him and to the reaction that the film might elicit, even though the filmmakers explicitly tried to counteract the Beats' role as cultural outlaws.

Just as he disliked the way that his editors revised and rendered more coherent his spontaneous prose for publication, he also objected to the recombination of his recorded word for the film's sound track. Kerouac approached sound recording for its properties as an immediate record, not a constructive medium. The details of his reaction are not recorded, but one can imagine his surprise at finding his marginal comments included as part of his supposedly ad-libbed narration.³⁵

As the film was completed, Leslie started thinking of advertising and publicity for the film. He sketched a poster, an image of a knee and foot, seen from a subjective angle. He also took out an advertisement in *Variety*, and announced the imminent release of *The Beat Generation*. He cribbed a slogan he had seen on a theater marquee: "At all times a splendid entertainment for the entire family—no sex—no violence."³⁶ Leslie recalls that this promotional device resulted in a letter from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer informing the filmmakers that the studio held the rights to the title, "The Beat Generation." Although Kerouac had been instrumental in inventing and popularizing the term, and had used it as the title of his unproduced play, he had never published anything titled with the phrase he represented. MGM, however, had bought the right to a book of that title, and in 1959 released Albert Zugsmith's production, a thriller starring Steve Cochran as a psychopathic killer loose in the bohemia of Southern California.

Besides protecting its interests in that film, MGM also had a stake in Kerouac. While no one had been able to produce a film version of *On the Road*, Arthur Freed prepared to produce a feature film based on *The Subterraneans*, for which the studio had paid only \$15,000, approximately the total cost of the G-String production. Without knowing what Frank and Leslie had made, MGM certainly had reason for seeing the announcement of a film called *THE BEAT GENERATION*, made with Kerouac's participation, as an infringement on its market. The first line of the film's theme song answered the need for a title. The film had already been reviewed once under the original title, although a footnote cautioned that the title would probably change.³⁷ By the time of its New York premiere at Cinema 16, the film was called *PULL MY DAISY*.

Billing the film as a "tragicomedy," Amos Vogel showed *PULL MY DAISY* on November 11, 1959, an evening called "The Cinema of Improvisation," which also included *SHADOWS*. Each year, Vogel interspersed "Special Events" in the regular Cinema 16 schedule, and the *PULL MY DAISY/SHADOWS* double bill was the first such special event of the 1959–1960 season. The sporadic showings of the film attracted a wide range of New Yorkers interested in the cinema. Its difference from the mainstream excited Emile de Antonio, and he arranged to serve as the film's distributor, although his purpose was to learn about the film industry in order to make his own films. Over lunch with Walter Gutman, the managing partner in G-String Enterprises, de Antonio struck a non-exclusive agreement to distribute the film. Because he had independent wealth, as well as office facilities and a secretary, he had the time and resources to devote to the enterprise. He called acquaintances, and had only limited success booking, partly because he simply lost interest in the business.

Although the film seemed timely, it appeared at the tail end of the Beat era. The initial impact of Kerouac was dissipating; despite the fact that five of his books would be published within the next 15 months, Kerouac still augmented his income by writing a column for *Escapade*, a *Playboy* imitation.

PULL MY DAISY did succeed in college communities, and indicated the value of that kind of venue for unconventional films. It found its greatest potential audience in followers of the literary Beat movement. However, in terms of other, more conventional forms of exhibition, the film's running time caused an insurmountable problem. At 28 minutes, it could not appear on a program by itself and it was too long to be treated as a short film. Furthermore, neither of

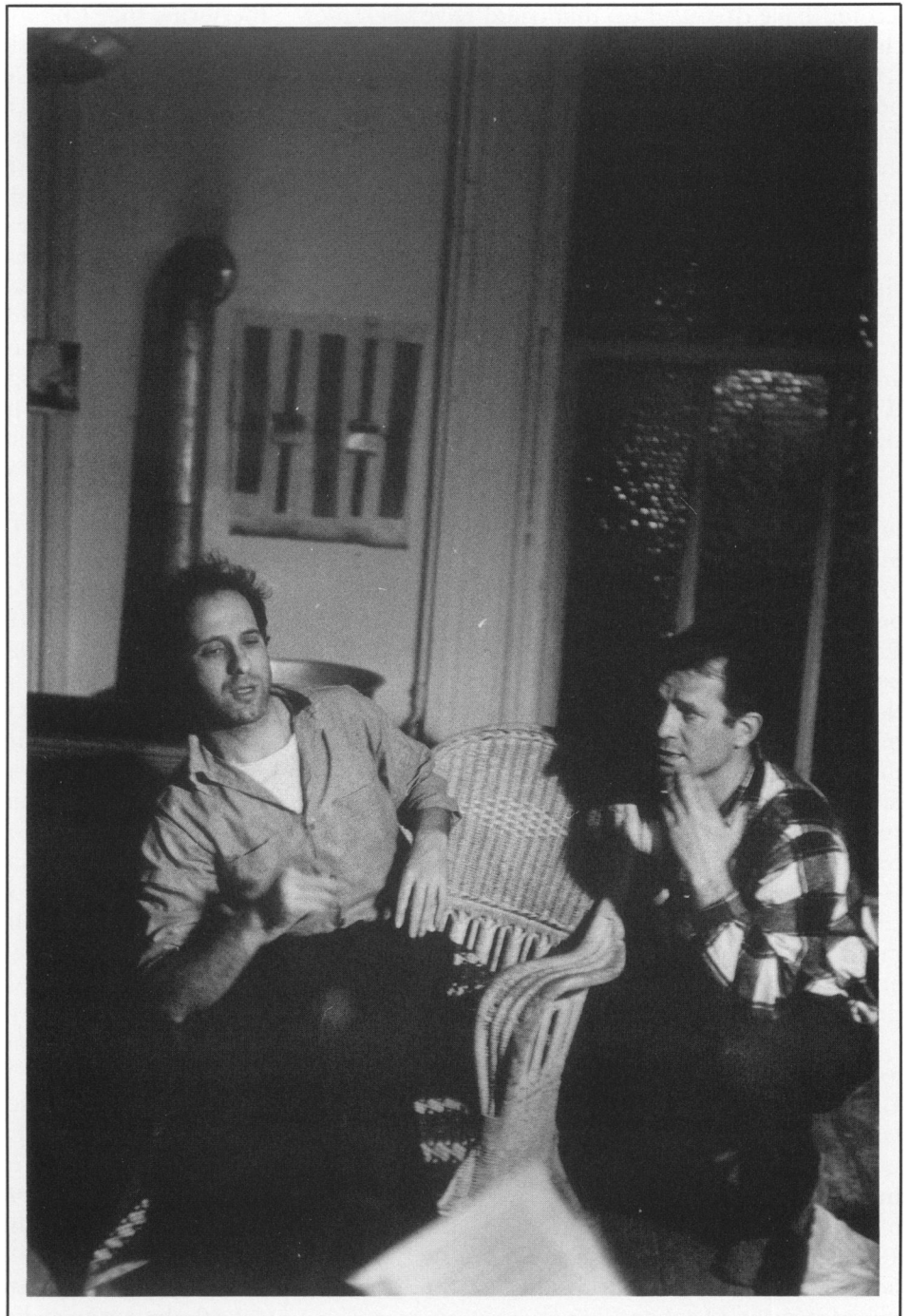
the filmmakers wanted it to be treated as a short subject.

The film's major commercial booking was the newly opened New Yorker Theatre. When it opened in the first week of April 1960 (almost a year after its completion), *PULL MY DAISY* preceded *THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS*. Although essentially a short, it was featured as a premiere engagement, and the film's title appeared on the marquee in the preferential higher position, selling the film on Kerouac's name. For the premiere, Robert Frank hired a hansom cab, and Mary, their daughter Andrea, and Dody Muller rode up and down Fifth Avenue and distributed daisies to pedestrians. According to Dody Muller, some people accepted the flowers, other brusquely refused the strange offering. Many got exactly the wrong idea, and thought that the stunt promoted the new Doris Day movie, *PLEASE DON'T EAT THE DAISIES* (1960).

The film had a reception that was only fair; unfortunately, it ran for only two weeks in the 900-seat theater. Daniel Talbot extended its life by programming it with another local independent production, Morris Engel's *THE LITTLE FUGITIVE*, for its second week. In contrast to *PULL MY DAISY*, Engel's low-budget feature about a boy's day at Coney Island was an unqualified success, on its way to earning a reported \$500,000 since its 1953 release.³⁸

That the distribution was subcontracted to de Antonio and that he made his deal with Gutman suggest the distance that both Frank and Leslie kept from the film after its completion. Unable to handle the more complicated, less directly rewarding elements of filmmaking, they became less involved with the film. According to Gutman, both filmmakers wanted to sell their places in the partnership for the token payment of one dollar. Gutman acceded to the agreement as a matter of form, but made it clear that he would sell the dollar shares back to the filmmakers if they came of value. Walter Ross reported that Frank had in fact sold his share in the film to Gutman for a dollar, and used this action as evidence of Frank's valuation of art over profit.³⁹ However, this overstates the case, especially considering the film's limited profitability. Leslie admits that he too wanted to absolve himself of daily management responsibilities because of his commitment to painting and because of the personal strains and pressures that followed the film's completion. However, he refused to permit Gutman's entry into the partnership as Frank's replacement, and communicated his thoughts to Gutman in writing. For the first two

Figure 7. Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac confer during PULL MY DAISY filming.



years of the film's life, Gutman had signing power for G-String Enterprises and managed the company. In the middle of 1962, after the film's initial runs, Leslie reclaimed managing control over the partnership. He perceived the problems if he were to shoulder responsibility for the film, but Gutman continued to sign the checks.⁴⁰

They had hoped that the success of PULL MY DAISY, sold on the coattails of the Beat Generation, would support the production of THE SIN OF JESUS and MR. Z., which had less obvious selling points. In addition, Alfred Leslie saw merchandising as part of a general pattern of cultural activity, with the film at its hub, stating, "If there was anything that

I could have dreamed up that could have been merchandised, including little statues of Allen and Gregory, I would have done it." Very few of the opportunities that he foresaw came about, however. The most notable example of ancillary activity was the published transcript of the film. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, negotiating to publish some of Kerouac's prose, had asked to see a transcription of the film, but found that Grove Press had already secured the rights. The book proved a complicated venture if only because of the number of different interests that it represented. Grove Press editor Richard Seaver and assistant Judith Schmidt had to deal with the film's bipartite ownership. Kerouac retained the rights to the film's spoken text, despite the film's editorial amendments to his original recorded tracks. Consequently Sterling Lord, his agent, negotiated on his behalf with regard to the book's printed text. G-String Enterprises owned the rights to the film's images. G-String, a limited partnership, involved both Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank, but Grove Press had also contracted Frank independently as the book's photo editor for a fee of \$100. To illustrate the volume, Frank selected several frame enlargements. A number of representatives, including Leslie, Gutman, and attorney Lee Lurie, negotiated for G-String.⁴¹ However, the complications and confusions over responsibility remained unclear. Seaver, for example, admitted that he had never heard of G-String Enterprises until a letter from Lord informed him of the production company's involvement. At one point, the procedures bogged down enough that Seaver threatened, though hollowly, to drop the project entirely.⁴²

Seaver worked closely with Kerouac and Frank, and the film was transcribed in painstaking detail. Grove Press had already used Robert Frank's pictures on the cover of *Evergreen Review*, which had helped to promote the film and the book. However, the book had a short life. Grove ordered a print run of 5000 copies and set a publication date of June 23, 1961. Selling in a paperback edition at \$1.45, the book was remaindered within a year and declared out of print in October 1965.⁴³

A second, failed merchandising attempt involved a recording with both the music of David Amram and the narration by Kerouac. Teo Macero, the producer who oversaw Columbia Records' principal jazz artists, had expressed interest in such a project. However, Amram, Ginsberg, and Kerouac, who all would have been involved directly in the record, had signed over their publishing rights to the music and the song, "The Crazy Daisy," to G-String Enterprises. Leslie refused to permit the record deal, objecting to

the terms that Columbia offered for the use of the sound track. He considered the offer exploitive and reasoned that if he agreed, he would lose control over the use of the film and what it represented. Without G-String consent, the individual artists could not continue to negotiate using that particular material. (Amram did finally record a version of the song on his catholic 1971 release, *No More Walls*.⁴⁴)

After the film was produced, Leslie and de Antonio talked with Kerouac about reconstructing the sound track in French for a foreign audience. Trying their idea out, and attempting to repeat Kerouac's performance, they rigged up a recording facility in Leslie's studio, and placed a projector on the fire escape to muffle the machine noise. Throughout his life, Kerouac was conscious of his French-Canadian heritage, but was less fluently bilingual than he might have believed. Drunk for this session as he had been for the first, he could not get beyond the opening, "*Un matin . . .*," a feeble attempt to translate the phrase, "Early morning in the universe." Andy Warhol also claimed to be at the session, invited by de Antonio, and noted that Kerouac started, in his Massachusetts-inflected French, "*Ju sweet Jacques Ker-ou-ac*"—and then something about his family being French nobility in the fourteenth century, which had nothing to do with this movie set on the Bowery, of course, so it was very funny."⁴⁵ They all realized that he was incapable of recapturing the style of the original commentary in French. Several years later, Leslie also thought of assembling the film's outtakes for a variant edition, to be called PULL MY DAISY AGAIN. He discussed the idea with filmmaker Ken Jacobs, but quashed the project when Frank, who had since produced films of his own, including THE SIN OF JESUS, requested that Leslie not make the sequel.⁴⁶

While Leslie retreated from filmmaking after a cataclysmic fire destroyed his studio in 1966, Robert Frank has continued to make motion pictures. After PULL MY DAISY, his first undertaking was THE SIN OF JESUS, the story he and Leslie had contracted as part of their trilogy project. Gutman produced the project, Frank directed, and his former camera assistant, Gert Berliner, worked as the cinematographer. THE SIN OF JESUS, like PULL MY DAISY, also encountered exhibition problems because its running time—40 minutes—made it too short for a feature and too long for a short. When a 1961 opening was planned, billing the two productions as "The Films of Robert Frank," Leslie objected and asked to pull PULL MY DAISY from the program. He remembers that some time later, ironically, Frank also wanted to withdraw the film from distri-

bution because its dual authorship adversely affected the progress of the films he had made on his own. However, the Film-Makers' Cooperative circulated Walter Gutman's print, and the filmmakers decided to return the film to the market.

In his review of the film after its first decade, Leslie pointedly asserts, "DAISY never earned back its investment because of friction and stupidity. It has been out of circulation for almost seven years because of this."⁴⁷ Because the original contracts had been lost in Sam Shaw's files, the principals had to rewrite their agreements. The contract that Abraham Spilky had drawn up still awaited Kerouac's signature late in 1961, even though the agreement had Sterling Lord's assent. As a consequence, the film remained out of distribution. Leslie brought the matter to Kerouac's attention, noting the film's withdrawal and the failure of the Columbia Records deal, and implored Kerouac to sign the contract, predicting bankruptcy as the only solution if he did not comply.⁴⁸ Although the filmmakers had planned to repay the investors, none received returns, and Leslie estimates that it actually took five to six years to repay the initial \$15,000. The film's historical value and steady following continue to attract 30 to 35 bookings per year, and a small rental income of \$1,000–\$3,000 per year in the U.S. for its distributor, Daniel Talbot's New Yorker Films.⁴⁹

In recent years, the film has enjoyed a small and selective revival, programmed as part of travelling exhibitions, such as "The American New Wave," organized by the Walker Art Center and Media Study/ Buffalo, and the Robert Frank retrospective assembled by Houston's Museum of Fine Arts. In fact, the Houston Museum's archival project devoted to Frank's work turned up a fine-grain answer print of PULL MY DAISY, which had been in Frank's possession and never used. The print—still bearing the title, "The Beat Generation," prior to the first image of the film—was used to strike new copies, timed by Frank himself, one now stored in Houston, and others of which have premiered at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley and at Film Forum in New York, as part of the theater's February 1988 "Beats and Beatniks" series.⁵⁰

Although the film stood for a cultural movement, it also remains more or less an isolated incident. PULL MY DAISY stands in line with important works of the avant-garde cinema attributed to collaborating teams of artists, which are paid lip service in history, but rarely given the due of historical or critical inquiry. The most obvious parallel case is that of MANHATTA, (1921) also the collaboration of a painter, Charles Sheeler, and a still photographer,

Paul Strand, and which has only recently been retrieved as a subject for serious critical and historical examination.⁵¹ Other examples might include the films of James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER (1928) and LOT IN SODOM (1933–34); PIE IN THE SKY (1938), by the team of Ralph Steiner, Elia Kazan, Molly Day Thatcher, and Irving Lerner; or IN THE STREET (1948), by Helen Levitt, Janice Loeb, and James Agee. Film criticism in general repeatedly reflects the difficulties in attributing responsibilities for collaborative works, and the history of the avant-garde film (even more so than the conventional narrative cinema, which had to fight tooth and nail for *auteurism*) has depended on the idea of the romantic artist. As individual film artists, neither of the makers of PULL MY DAISY has ever been in danger of critical overvaluation. Filmmakers who have produced volumes of work as small or smaller than either Alfred Leslie's or Robert Frank's have attracted greater amounts of critical attention. Of course, neither has courted attention, the former retiring from filmmaking and the latter simply reticent to circulate or promote the work he has produced over the last three decades. (As Anne Tucker points out, although Robert Frank has continued to complete films, videotapes, and photographic assemblages, he remains best known for a book and a film he made in the 1950s.⁵²)

PULL MY DAISY had a meteoric and penetrating effect on a segment of United States culture in general and on independent filmmaking in particular. Yet the film also lost momentum remarkably quickly. It bore the stamp of an authentically beat film, but the movement itself was waning and transforming by the end of the 1950s, and as a consequence the film may have been marred by its lateness, relegated to secondary status. Like Alfred Leslie's own Abstract Expressionist painting of the 1950s, regularly considered second generation and secondary to the work of artists who impressed the art markets first, such as Pollock and de Kooning (a situation, according to novelist Frederick Barthelme, "known to all artists the world over as *Alfred Leslie syndrome*"⁵³), Leslie's and Frank's first film suffered from being only the slightest bit out of step with the times it purported to capture. If it was current to the Beat Generation, it also appeared at the moment when the movement was being assimilated and defused through the mass media, when the beats became "beatniks."

The film attracted critical attention in the mainstream press as well as more specialized, small-circulation publications, and it gained both acclaim and derision. However, it has faded from importance and



Figure 8. Gregory Corso, Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank. The start of “la nouvelle vague de New York.”

into neglect in the critical canon of the United States avant-garde film. It, like most films of the New American Cinema, gets a nod as an important work, but little sustained attention to justify that opinion. The initially high level of curiosity in the film resulted in an appropriately high volume of response. Curiosity in a subsequent stage of the avant-garde—specifically the underground cinema of Andy Warhol—superseded interest in PULL MY DAISY and other films of its type.

Walter Ross pointed out in an article on the independent filmmaking movement, which he called “La nouvelle vague de New York,” that the release of John Cassavete’s SHADOWS in 1958 and PULL MY DAISY the next year marked a new type of film not only for the audience but also for other filmmakers. Cassavetes and Leslie and Frank proved that it was possible to produce narrative films that challenged the dominance of Hollywood fiction. The looks of the films, determined partly by choice and partly by low budgets, connoted the filmmakers’ commitment to produce and complete the projects, and inspired other filmmakers. “The new film makers imitate PULL MY DAISY and SHADOWS for two reasons,” Ross declared: “(1) they are successful and (2) they seem easy.”⁵⁴

Obviously, there was more to the story. ●

NOTES

*Undocumented statements and much of the information in this article come from personal and telephone interviews with David Amram, Richard Bellamy, Gert Berliner, John Cohen, Emile de Antonio, Anita Ellis, Allen Ginsberg, Walter Gutman, Alfred Leslie, Dody Muller, Peter Orlovsky, and Leon Prochnik.

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35. See McNally, 263.
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40. Alfred Leslie, Letter to Walter Gutman, 21 June 1961. Collection of Alfred Leslie.
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